



PRESIDENTIAL PRESS CONFERENCE....

- How does Mr. Kennedy prepare for it?
- Does he know who'll ask what?
- Are the questions controlled?
- Who briefs him?
- How has he broken tradition?

By WILLIAM H. LAWRENCE, ABC's White House Correspondent

A tremendous amount of preparation precedes the "live," unrehearsed, spontaneous Presidential news conferences telecast about twice a month.

And the payoff is the fact that the program has become the best exhibit of western democracy in action. Nowhere else on earth can newsmen and newswomen quiz the President or head of government in their country on every conceivable subject, foreign and domestic.

In comparative terms, the closest contender is the question period of the British House of Commons, but here Her Majesty's Ministers require written notice of the questions they

are expected to answer. And the questions come only from other Members of Parliament.

The advance planning by the White House falls short of rehearsal. Newsmen are not, and, of course, should not be included in the preparatory stage. The President, therefore, cannot have the slightest idea which reporter will pose which question. Nor can the President know whether his next questioner will continue with a trend then developing in foreign affairs, say Cuba for example; or whether the next query will change the subject.

There is no regular timetable for

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the Presidential meetings with the press, though he seems to prefer afternoon to morning and Thursday to any other day of the week. While Candidate Kennedy promised news conferences weekly, President Kennedy has found a more irregular schedule to his liking. Sometimes there are five or six in a row, week after week, then a long interruption. The statistics for the first 26 months Mr. Kennedy was in office show a total of 53 news conferences, or two and one-twenty-sixth per month. In his eight years, President Eisenhower held 193 news conferences, or two and one-ninety-sixth conferences per month.

The accredited White House correspondents, totaling about 1200, usually have two to four days' notice of an impending news conference. The networks have a similar amount of time to bring their television cameras, their big "shotgun" microphones and other gear into the auditorium of the new State Department Building.

The announcement by White House Press Secretary Pierre Salinger that a news conference is imminent also is the first signal for Government-wide preparations.

Because the Presidential news conference provides a focus of national interest that can't be topped, every department of Government looks into its file of current activities, of actions or decisions ready to be announced, to see if an important one might be shifted from the cabinet officer to the President and thus attract more attention to the event.

Given "live" national broadcasts by TV and radio of the Presidential news conferences, one wonders how the press chiefs of United States Steel could have forgotten the built-in forum with which Mr. Kennedy could blast its effort to raise steel prices in April 1962. Big Steel told the President of its price increase plan one day before a regular news conference that already had been announced. If notifi-

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cation had been withheld for only 24 hours, it might have been more difficult for the President to organize swiftly enough a national forum of equal impact.

Salinger doesn't miss many bets in the public relations field. One day in advance of every Presidential news conference he has a session with the Administration's top spokesmen for a variety of departments covering a wide range of activities. He always includes the most sensitive, important departments.

He polls: Robert Manning, State; Arthur Sylvester, Defense; Dixon Donnelley, Treasury; George Reedy, representing Vice President Johnson; Nedville Nordness, Arms Control and the Disarmament Agency; Col. Stanley Grogan, Central Intelligence Agency; and consults the two White House press office associates, Andrew Hatcher and Malcolm Kilduff.

Other press chiefs are called in as the news spotlight shifts from one department to another. The Salinger group meets for about an hour, discussing the questions it thinks newsmen might ask in the light of current developments. Answers are formulated and sometimes written down.

On news conference day, there's an advance Presidential briefing. Some of the most trusted Administration advisors are summoned to breakfast in the family dining room of the White House, or to a meeting at about 10 A.M. in the President's oval office in the West Wing. The regular participants in this session are Secretary of State Dean Rusk (or if he is away, Under Secretary George Ball); Theodore Sorensen, Special Counsel to the President, who is the No. 1 White House staff member on problems both foreign and domestic; Dr. Walter Heller, chairman of the President's Council of Economic Advisors; McGeorge Bundy, Presidential advisor on National Security affairs; Myer Feldman, Deputy Special Coun-

sel to the President; Mr. Manning and Mr. Salinger. Vice President Johnson often participates.

In an informal friendly way, the President and these advisors kick around the probable questions of the day, suggest answers back and forth, and sometimes contribute humorous quips that would make a Presidential riposte more salty.

I asked one regular participant if these pre-conference sessions with the President were anything like a rehearsal, with the advisors throwing questions from various sides of the table to test Mr. Kennedy's reflexes and responses. He said no.

Another Administration official said that the amount of written material in the folder for any Presidential news conference was quite slim. But there is another, bigger, black, leather-bound, loose-leaf notebook marked for "The President," prepared by the State Department. It is a quick summary of problems around the globe.

A command of facts, figures

Reporters, those friendly and not-so-friendly, never cease to be amazed at the facts and figures at the President's command. This grasp can be credited in part to his habit of reading newspapers and magazines, listening to one or more TV news shows daily, and watching TV documentaries dealing with political, international and economic problems of the day. This is in sharp contrast to President Eisenhower, who once said that he seldom read a newspaper.

Mr. Kennedy also answers complex questions swiftly because he insists that from beginning to end he be included in the process of arriving at policy decisions. President Eisenhower, on the other hand, preferred to render final decisions after much of the back-

and-forth argument of policy making had been carried out by subordinates such as Sherman Adams, for many years his White House Chief of Staff.

He gets there early

On news conference day, the President arranges to leave the White House for a short automobile trip to the State Department so that he can reach the basement entrance about 10 minutes ahead of time. There he is met by his host, Secretary Rusk or Acting Secretary Ball, and escorted to a small conference room just off the main auditorium.

In those final six minutes before the red lights of the cameras flash on, a quick check is made at State, at Defense, and of the news service tickers so that the President is fully abreast of the latest news as he walks into the auditorium and before the cameras that will broadcast his image into millions of homes.

As he appears from the right (on the home screen), the reporters (average: 334 for the last four news conferences) stand and the President motions them back to their seats as he reaches the lectern, which bears the 50-state seal of "The President of the United States." Mr. Kennedy usually wears a dark suit and a dark tie, but he makes no other concessions to TV.

The President never wears makeup and still likes to joke about the makeup difficulties of former Vice President Nixon in the first of their TV Great Debates during the 1960 Presidential campaign.

The news conference gets underway with the President reading, rather rapidly, his prepared statements if he has any. If not, he indicates that direct questioning may begin.

The first question always is posed by the White House correspondent of the Associated Press or the United Press International, the two wire serv-

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ices. They take turns, and, after the first question, the President usually recognizes the other wire reporter.

After that, the pattern of Presidential recognition is far from regular. The wire men sit in the front row of the center section, but toward the left end as the reporters see it. After the first couple of questions, the President usually shifts to the left section (to my area, on the aisle, third row) and picks out questioners there for a while. Then back to the center section, and concluding with questioners from the right.

But this pattern, I repeat, is not always followed. At a quite recent news conference, the President began with the wire service men, stayed in the center section for a long time, then moved to the right. After fully 25 minutes, he realized he had neglected reporters clamoring for attention on the left and reminded himself (in an audible undertone many reporters could hear) that he had not taken any questions from the left (geographically speaking, of course).

Turns to Right... geographically

But even in speaking informally, he tends to play to the right side of any audience group. Republicans, I am sure, will realize that this is a strictly geographical description of Mr. Kennedy's speaking habits.

While there are many complaints about news management or, more accurately, news mismanagement off the New Frontier, there have not been any serious complaints that the President plays favorites in selecting press conference questioners. Some reporters, trying to outsmart the President's geographic habits, do shift their regular seats in an effort to catch his eye more frequently than their old seats seem to permit.

Mr. Kennedy, of course, does tend to recognize persons whose faces are

known to him because of long acquaintanceship. But there are so many of these they hardly fit the description of "favorites," a word that more properly might be applied to those who get in the back door of the White House for an occasional private chat with the President. But this latter group isn't small either.

The 30-minute tradition

The news conference concludes—after almost exactly 30 minutes' duration—with "Thank you, Mr. President," shouted by Merriman Smith, White House correspondent for UPI, the senior wire service man regularly assigned to the White House. The custom that the senior wire service man should terminate the conference was brought to Washington from Albany by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. It was FDR who really founded the modern Presidential news conference although it remained for James C. Hagerty to put it on film for Mr. Eisenhower and for Salinger to make it live for radio and TV.

The 30-minute time period, by the way, isn't the invention of the networks, as some might suspect. Presidents prefer it that way.

President Eisenhower budgeted for news conferences exactly 30 minutes of his time (and they weren't live on radio and TV in those days). When Merriman Smith let the questioning run a minute or two longer than 30 minutes, he usually heard from the President that he wasn't doing his job.

On a couple of occasions, President Kennedy has ignored a "Thank you, Mr. President" from Smith to take one more question. One of these times the result was an embarrassing, direct query that flustered the President, and caused him to remark, ruefully but with a smile, that Smith had been right as usual to try to call the performance to a halt.